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Two Cheers for *Ancient Rome*!!
A Christian Reappraisal of the *Evil Empire*...

Fall, 2017, Eric Wright, Ann Arbor Christian Reformed Church

“There is no justice in history. Most past cultures have sooner or later fallen prey to the armies of some ruthless empire, which have consigned them to oblivion. Empires, too, ultimately fall, but they tend to leave behind rich and enduring legacies. Almost all people in the twenty-first century are the offspring of one empire or another.”

– Yuval Noah Harari,
Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind

Third Session:

- I. Introduction to Roman culture, historical approach, general questions and issues. (October 15, 2017).
- II. Rome in its Historical context. (October 22, 2017).
- III. Christianity in the Roman world. (October 29, 2017).
- IV. Further questions and *our* current assessment of ancient Rome! (November 5, 2017).

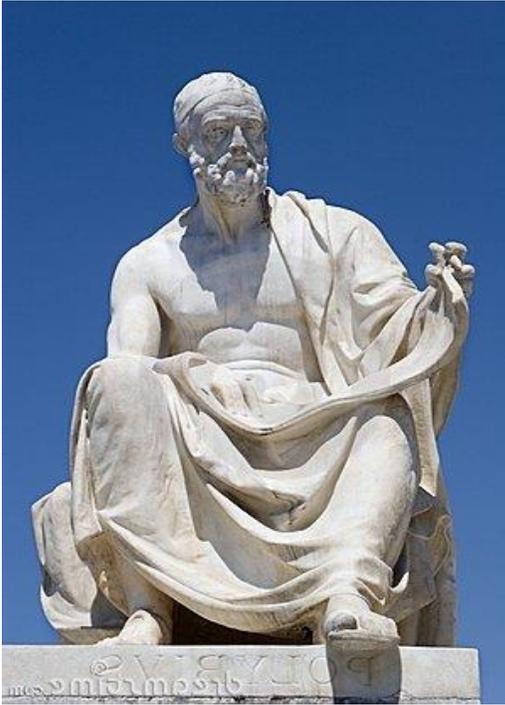


- THIRD SESSION, October 29, 2017
- ✠ *Christianity and ancient Rome*

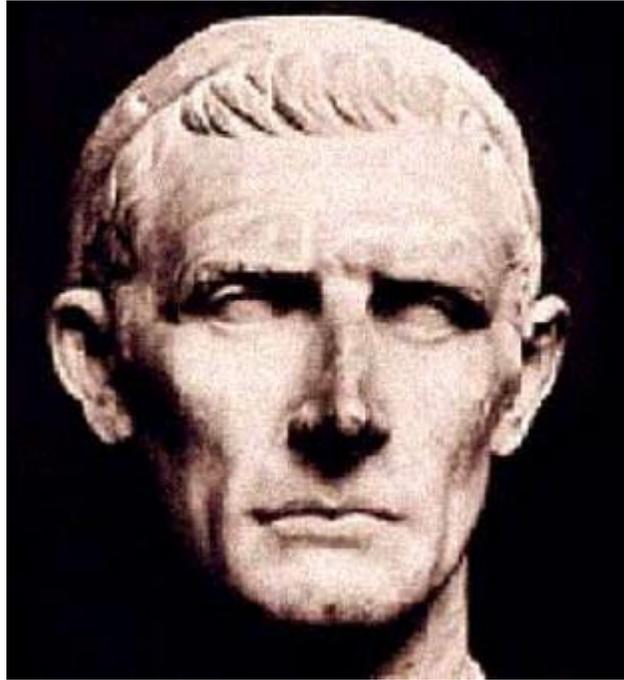
- How did ancient Rome influence – and get influenced by – the Christian church? (Christ & Culture model in framing this question...).
- Christianity and Rome in conflict and in communion.
- Constantine's conversion – and conversion of empire.
- Roman Christians persecuted *pagan Romans*! (Shoe on other foot...) O'Donnell's book, *Pagans*
- Paul benefited from Roman infrastructure to spread the gospel.

A Procession of Particulars...

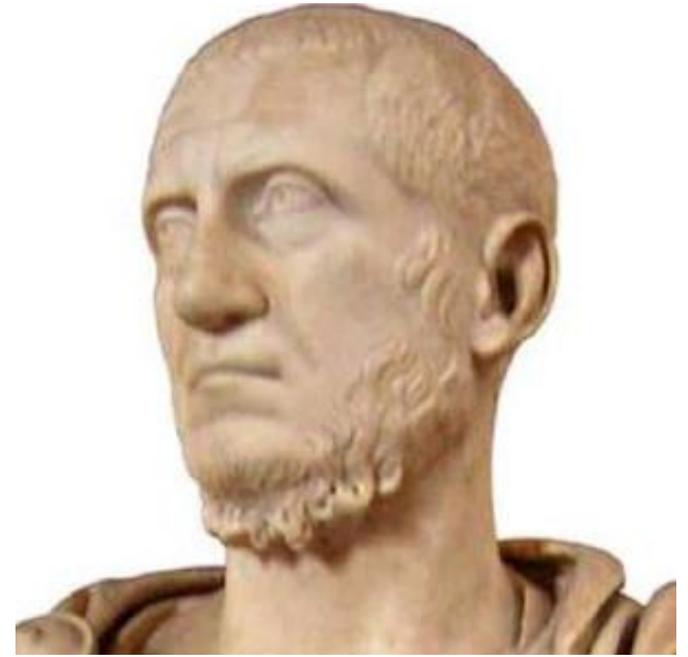




POLYBIUS



LIVY



TACITUS

(From last week):

Romans would be first to admit their faults. In fact, many excesses are known precisely *because* of them.
(A fascinating noble effort to achieve virtue through stoicism and emulation of the Greeks.)

- Another historian, Tacitus, wrote bitterly about Augustus and his successors, who, he felt, had destroyed Roman liberty. He admired the simple culture of the Germans who lived on Rome's northern frontier and would later invade the empire.



The line, “*Solitudinem fecerrunt, pacem appellant,*” (“They made it a desert and called it peace”) by Tacitus embodies *Roman* criticism of the project of empire itself. It was *not*, as one historian posits, the Enlightenment that gave us the tools to criticize ancient Rome – it merely gave us more specialized tools.



“Oath of the Horatii,” “celebrates patriotism and questions its cost.”



Contemporary citizens of Rome were ambivalent about Caesar's genocidal conquest of Gaul (1 million dead). Some charged him with precisely the crime of "genocide," or a historically equivalent version of that term.



PEACE IN ROME MEANT:

A strong army posted in areas where enemies would cause trouble

Pax Romana!

(27 B.C.E. – 180 C.E.)



Rome's genius: assimilating citizen recruits from conquered lands and *letting people become what they weren't*. (Beard)

Christianity and Rome



Anti-Christian graffiti c.225; crucified Jesus with donkey's head: "Alexamenos worships [his] God."

“At the end of the first century there were fewer than ten thousand Christians in the Roman Empire. The population at the time numbered some sixty million, which meant that Christians made up one hundredth of one percent, or 0.0017 percent, according to the figures of a contemporary [our time] sociologist.”

—Robert Louis Wilken, *The First Thousand Years: A Global History of Christianity* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2012), 65-66.

[Wilken, source for next 5 slides.]

“By the year 200, the number may have increased to a little more than two hundred thousand, still a tiny minority, under one percent (0.36).”

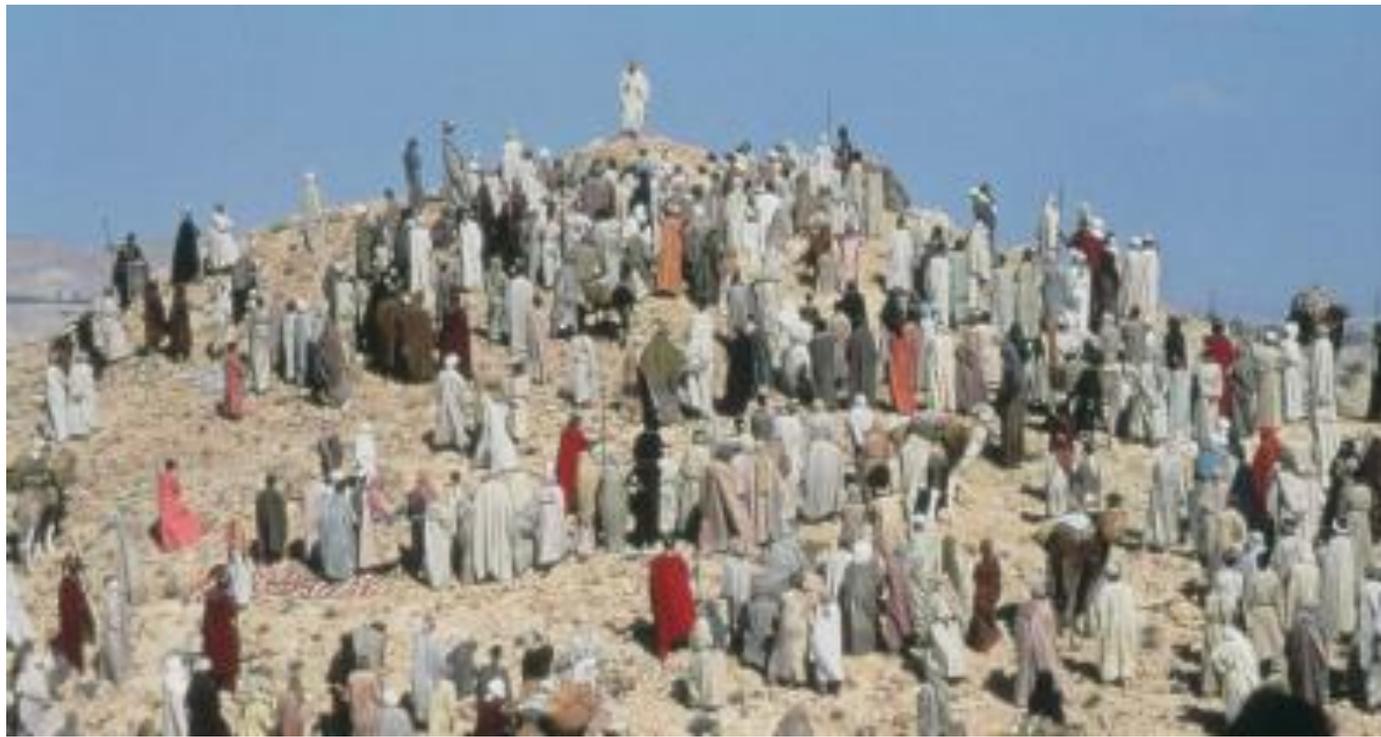




“By the year 250, however, the number had risen to more than a million, almost two percent of the population.”

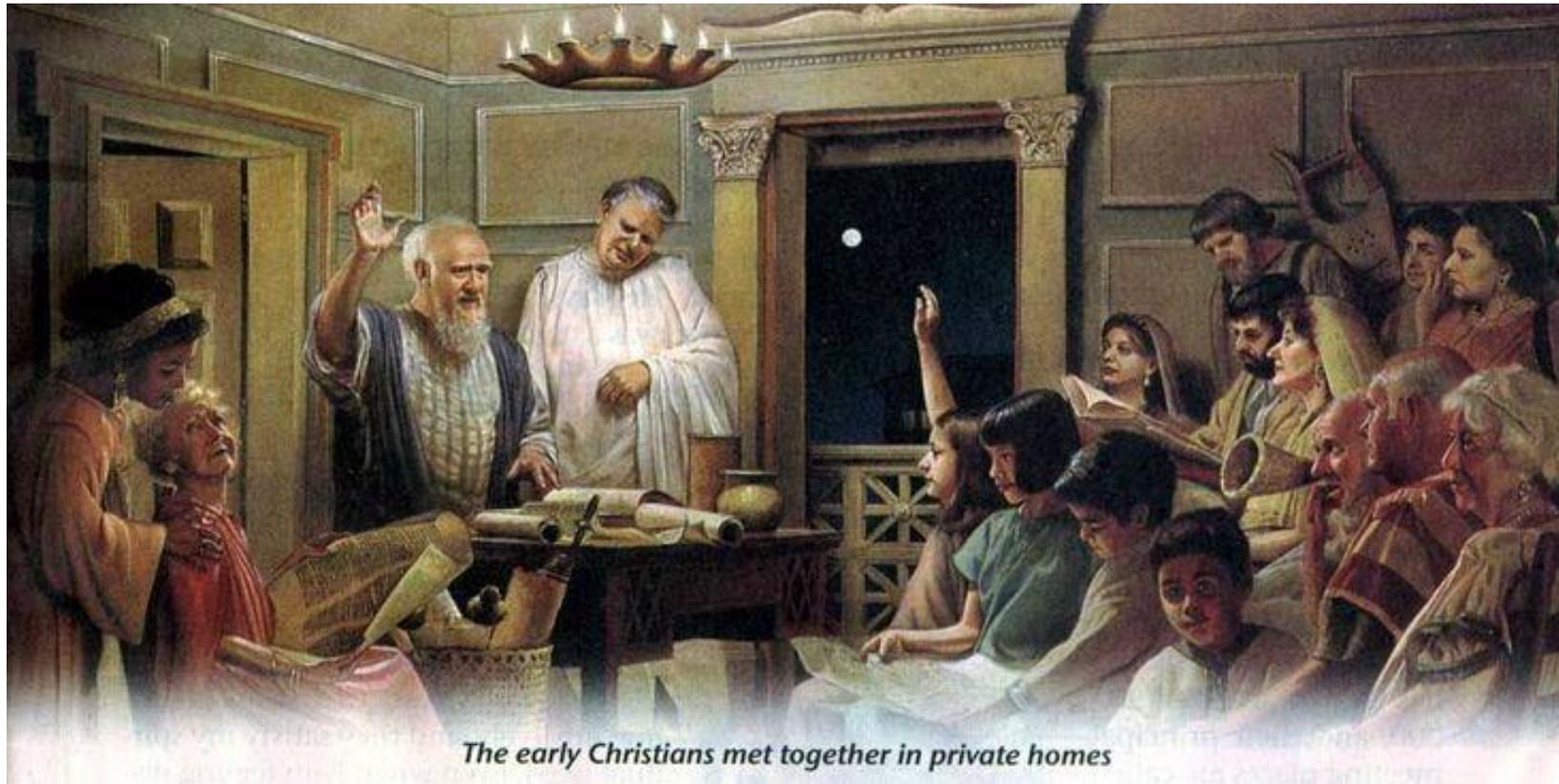


“The most striking figure, however, comes two generations later. **By the year 300** Christians made up 10 percent of the population, approximately 6 million.”



“All of these figures are estimates. Because there are no hard demographic data, they can be used only with other evidence.

They show that in absolute numbers, Christianity grew slowly at first, but the pace picked up in the third century, and if one were to draw a graph for the fourth century the line would mount in a steep upward curve.”



The early Christians met together in private homes

“Christians could be found in all the major cities of the empire and in many smaller cities, and it was becoming apparent that Christian was not a passing phenomenon. What is more, **the Church attracted people from all walks of life and from all social classes, and its leaders were well educated, culture, resourceful, and articulate.**”

- (Wilken)



There's a lot of surviving evidence, argument, self-justification from Roman writers, little ("almost nothing") from "pagan" opponents.



The term, “pagan,” was invented in the 4th Century by Christians to describe people “of the countryside” (usually non-urban, as Christianity was largely an urban religion).



Christian writings in the 3rd, 4th, and 5th Centuries betray a triumphalist history with extreme examples of rewriting history to fit the agenda of the winners. – (O'Donnell, *Pagans*)

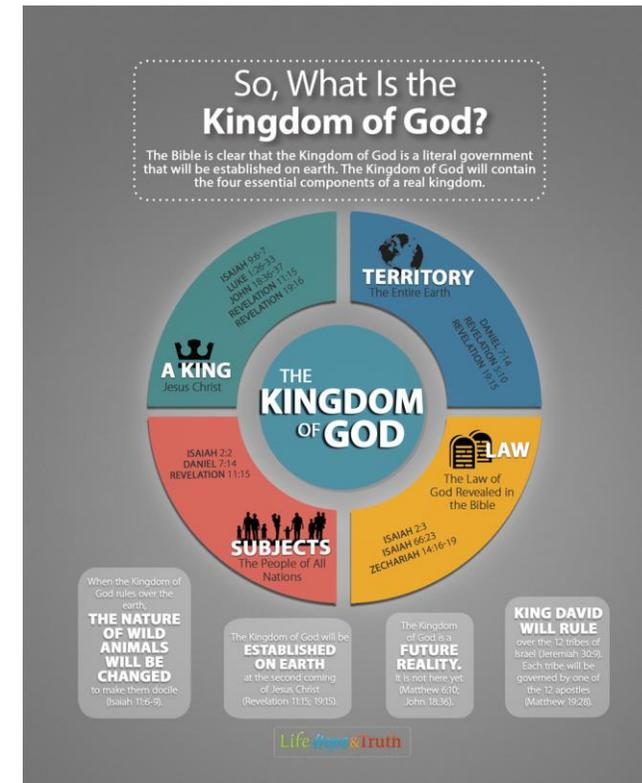


Reconstruction of a Wealthy Priest's Home in Jerusalem's Upper City

At various times in its history, $\frac{1}{4}$ of Rome's population were freed slaves, though a large percentage of the earliest converts to Christianity were wealthy.



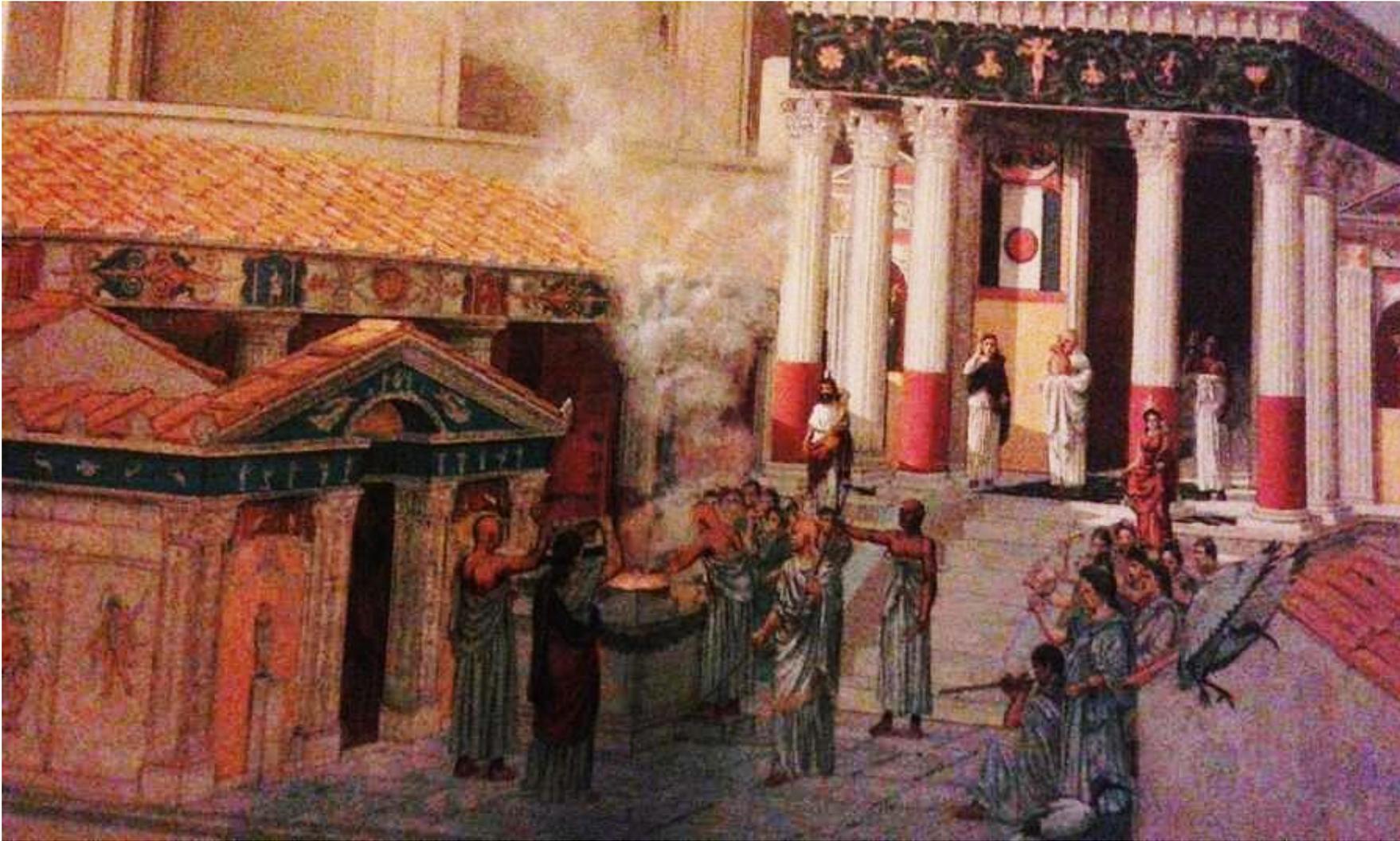
The Roman persecution of Christians under Nero, Domitian, Marcus Aurelius, and Diocletian were not always continuous, and were largely sporadic, localized, and forms of targeted scapegoating.



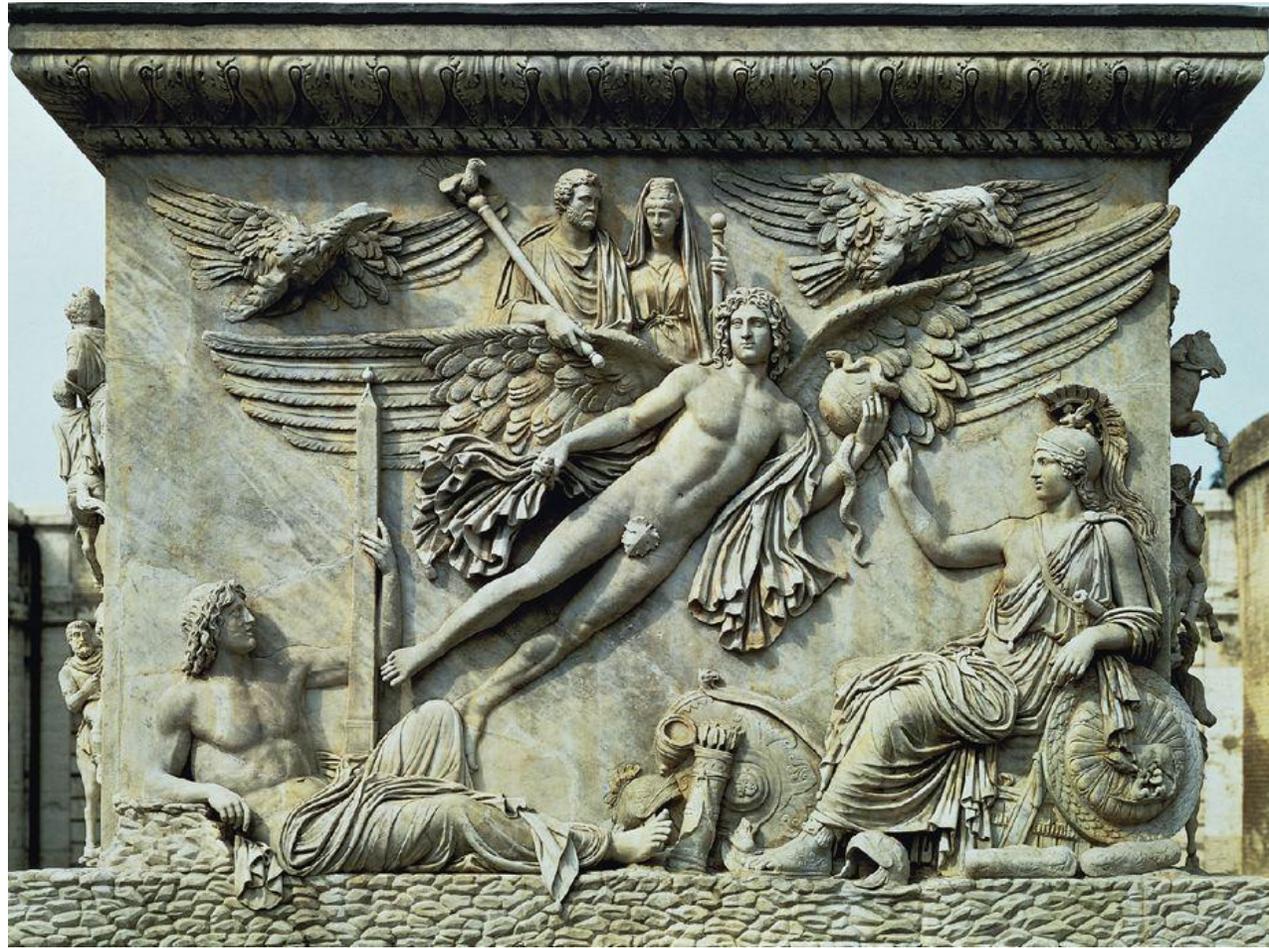
Christianity created a clash between traditional Roman values (a polytheistic incorporation) and a religion that had no ancestral home (instead a “Kingdom of Heaven”); to Romans, the Christian god was rootless, universal, and sought new adherents.



Christianity uprooted the values of the classical world, suggesting that poverty was good and that the body should be rejected, not just “cared for,” as the Greeks and Romans celebrated and emphasized.



Roman religion, not quite a “religion” as we currently think of it, it was largely more a kind of “civil religion.”



Rome's polytheistic religion was flexible. Emperors could be deified and so, too, could their family members. The process by which this occurred confounded Roman thinkers. (Seneca's skit re: Claudius).



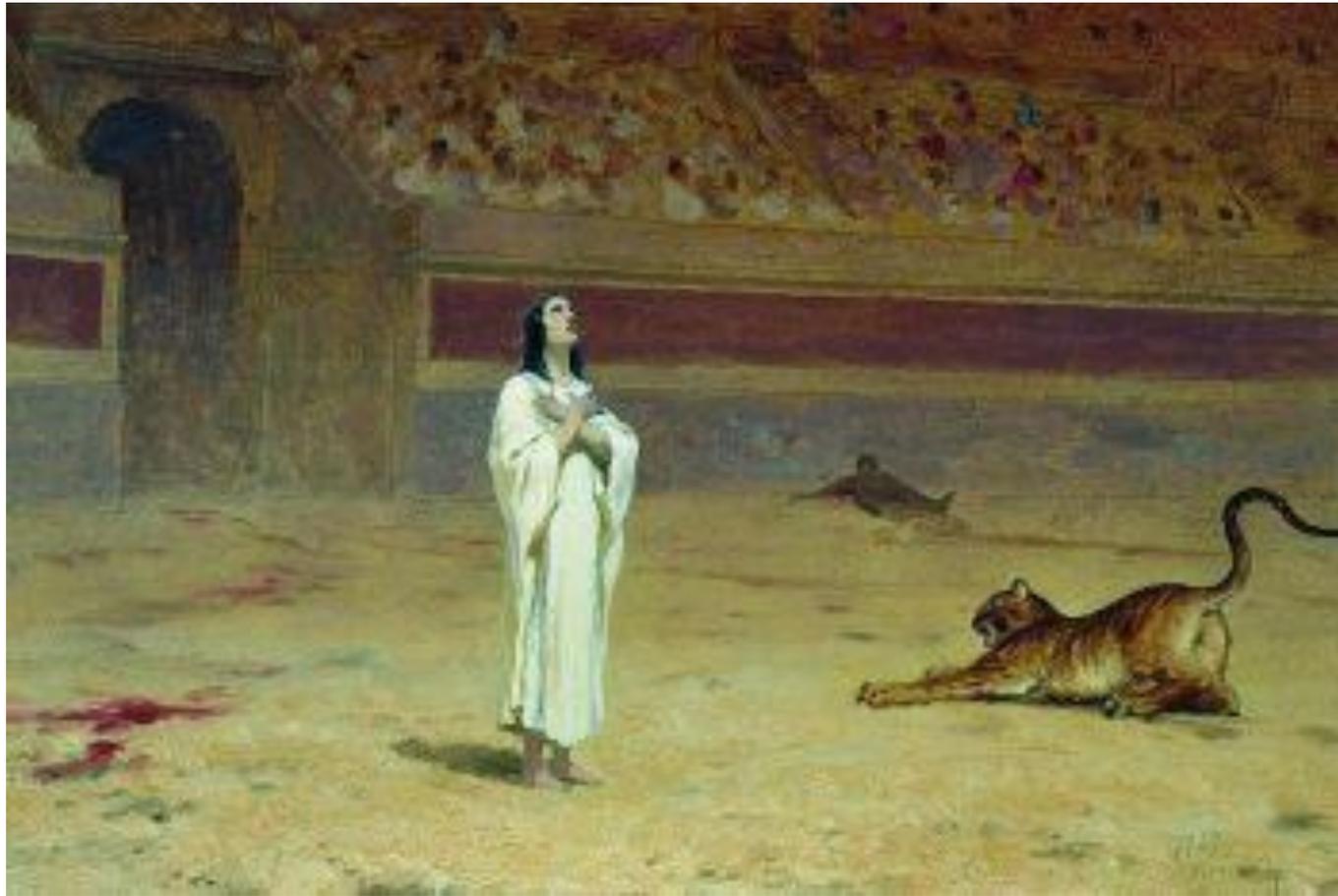
“...the success of Christianity was rooted in the Roman Empire, in its territorial extent, in the mobility that it promoted, in its towns and cultural mix. ...Christianity spread from its small-scale origins in Judaea largely because of the channels of communications across the Mediterranean world that the Roman Empire had opened up and because of the movement through those channels of people, goods, books and ideas.” (Beard)



“The irony is that the only religion that the Romans ever attempted to eradicate was the one whose success their empire made possible and which grew up entirely within the Roman world.” (Beard)



“Roman security, stability and prosperity (and *general* toleration) gave the church opportunities for growth.” (Opeka).



Paradoxically, Rome helped the church by creating martyrs and sympathy, “forcing Christians to move to new areas, get organized, and help each other decide who and what was worth sacrificing for.” (Opeka).



The main reason Constantine legalized the church was to maintain stability. The church had to allow Constantine to interfere *in* the church.



In many ways, becoming a state religion was not good for the church (too **hypocritical**, **power hungry**, too much **corruption** of the church's witness, practice, and doctrine. Problem of **unconverted "Christians."**) **"Christian" emperors and wannabe emperors massacred each other with the same zeal as the pre-Christian emperors."** (Opeka).

Hard Questions:

The “Roman Empire” in the east lasted another 1,000 years, *but it can be fairly asked:*

- What did Christianity *add* or *subtract* there that another religion(s) wouldn't have? (Islamic empires lasted from c.700 to c.1900). **There was a change in who was persecuted, from Christians to pagans, Arians, “heretics,” Etc.**



How were the empires managed by Christians fundamentally *improvements* on the non-Christian empires?



With Chi-Rho painted on their shields, Constantine's men crowd down to the pontoon structure over which Maxentius's men were trying to escape.

Non-Catholics were marginalized and pretty much wiped out during the church's hegemony. The church preserved Roman structure, language, and culture which was good for civilization in the west. It also created the theological, political, and economic corruptions that Protestants revolted against in the 17th Century, and which fomented convulsive wars of religion (Thirty Years War, 1618 – 1648, resulting in 8 million casualties).



“If we combine all the victims of all the (Roman) persecutions, it turns out that [between the crucifixion of Jesus and the conversion of Constantine, 300 years later], the polytheistic Romans killed no more than a few thousand Christians.” (Harari, citing W.H.C. Friend, *Martyrdom and Persecutions in the Early Church*, Cambridge, James Clark & Co., 2008).



Compare this to the millions of Christians slaughtered by other Christians who held, “slightly different interpretations of the religion of love and compassion.” (Harari). (In one 24-hour period, August 23, 1572, 5-10,000 Protestant Christians were killed in the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre, a number greater than those killed during the entirety of the Roman Empire!



St. Ignatius of Antioch, 35 C.E. to 108 C.E., first of the Christian Patriarchs and first to use the phrase, “catholic church,” martyred in the arena during Trajan’s reign.

Fin,
Session 3
(of IV)